SPORT

Pogba returns in Monaco loss as PSG stay top

PARIS: Paul Pogba made his long-awaited return to competitive football in AS Monaco's 4-1 loss at Rennes on Saturday, while Paris St-Germain kept hold of top spot in Ligue 1 with a win over Le Havre.

Pogba, 32, came on as a late substitute for Monaco in his first appearance in over two years after his career was derailed by injuries, a doping suspension and an extortion case in which he was the victim.

"Football isn't over for me. We've worked hard, we've waited more than two years to get back, and today it finally happened. Thank God," said Pogba.

The 2018 World Cup winner received a warm ovation from supporters at Roazhon Park when he came on in the 85th minute and again after the final whistle.

"It really touched me to see the crowd stand and applaud. I honestly didn't expect that, so a huge thank you to all the fans who were there today and supported me," said Pogba.

The midfielder failed a drugs test in August 2023 and was handed a four-year ban, which was subsequently reduced to 18 months.

Nonetheless Juve terminated his contract last November, bringing to an early end an unhappy second stint in Turin blighted by injuries.

In 2024, his brother Mathias was sentenced to three years in prison, with two years suspended, for his role in a plot to extort 13 million euros from Pogba in 2022.

But the chance to salvage his career came in the form of Monaco, who decided to take a gamble on him once he became available again following the conclusion of his suspension in March.

Monaco have been cautious in their approach to preparing Pogba for a return to competitive action, but coach Sebastien Pocognoli chose to bring on the midfielder with his team trailing by four goals and down to 10 men. Abdelhamid Ait Boudlal and Mahdi Camara struck for Rennes before Denis Zakaria was sent off. Breel Embolo added to the lead and Ludovic Blas scored a penalty, with Monaco pulling one back through Mika Biereth after the introduction of Pogba.

"It's great... the return of Paul Pogba, but I play for Monaco — that's my team, and I hate losing," said Pogba. "I'm relieved to be back playing football, the thing I love most in the world."

In Saturday's late match, PSG eased to a 3-0 victory at home to Le Havre courtesy of goals from Lee Kang-in, Joao Neves and Bradley Barcola.

Luis Enrique's side reclaimed first place and their two-point cushion after temporarily dropping behind Olympique de Marseille and RC Lens, who edged Strasbourg 1-0 earlier on Saturday.

Ismaelo Ganiou grabbed the Lens winner midway through the second half before Strasbourg's Valentin Barco was sent off. Lens also finished with 10 men as Morgan Guilavogui saw red in stoppage time.—AFP

BARCELONA: Barcelona's Fermin Lopez (C) shoots to score during the La Liga match against Athletic Bilbao at Camp Nou.—Reuters

Barca mark Camp Nou return with rout of Athletic

BARCELONA: Ferran Torres struck twice as Barcelona marked their long-awaited return to their Camp Nou Stadium with an emphatic 4-0 win over Athletic Bilbao on Saturday.

Barca provisionally climbed to the top of the La Liga standings on 31 points while Athletic are eighth with 17 points.

This was Barcelona's first match at Camp Nou in 909 days, as the partially renovated stadium welcomed fans back after two and a half years of redevelopment.

The ground is currently operating at a reduced capacity of 45,401, significantly lower than the anticipated 105,000 seats planned upon the project's completion.

The crowd witnessed a dominant display by the home side in an emotional homecoming, creating a lively atmosphere that ended with fireworks following the final whistle.

Robert Lewandowski set the tone early, capitalising on an error in Athletic's defence in the fourth minute. Alex Berenger mishandled the ball while attempting to play out from the back, allowing the Polish striker to seize possession and fire a low effort past Unai Simon at the near post.

Barcelona maintained control throughout, relentlessly pressuring an out-of-form Athletic side. Ernesto Valverde's charges have only managed three wins since September, losing six of their last nine league fixtures.

Barcelona struck again in first-half stoppage time. Lamine Yamal's expertly delivered long ball into space found Torres and the Spanish forward took the pass perfectly in his stride, raced into the area and calmly slotted past Simon.

Three minutes into the second half, Barcelona punished another defensive lapse by Athletic. Attempting to play out from the back, the visitors gifted possession to the alert Fermin Lopez, who rifled a bullet strike into the net.

Athletic's frustrations boiled over when Oihan Sancet was sent off with a straight red card in the 53rd minute following a reckless challenge on Lopez.

In the closing stages, Torres added his second, rounding off another counter-attack set up by the 18-year-old Yamal who provided a second sublime assist.

"Coming back to the Camp Nou is a special day," Lewandowski told DAZN. "We're very happy and pleased. For returning with a win. We played very well. Two goals in each half... To be honest, it's different when we play here. We gain in confidence.

"I'm 37 years old, but it was also special for me to play here again. Even better to score a goal."

Elsewhere on Saturday, third-place Villarreal kept the pressure on the top two with a 2-1 win over Mallorca to take them within two points of the leaders.

Meanwhile, Ander Barrenetxea scored a brilliant goal from near the halfway line for Real Sociedad as they overcame Osasuna 3-1 to move into mid-table.—Agencies

Sindh swimmers dominate at national championship

ISLAMABAD: Swimmers from Sindh province put in a commanding performance at the 29th National Age Group Swimming Championship, claiming the best swimmer awards in three out of four boys' categories as the event concluded here at the Pakistan Sports Complex on Sunday.

Mohammad Rafi (U-12), Ali Usman (U-14) and Syed Azlan Sohail (U-16) were all crowned best swimmers in their respective age groups.

The sole exception was in the U-10 category, where Punjab's Mohammad Aban Kashif took the honour after winning five gold medals.

The competition saw several new national records set. In the boys' U-16 event, Azlan from Sindh set a new record in the 200m Individual medley with a time of 2:13.82 on his way to being named best swimmer.

Other record-breaking performances came from Zayyan Ali Khan of Punjab in the U-10 50m backstroke (38.10 seconds), and a Punjab team in the U-10 4x50m freestyle relay (2:19.02).

Sindh's swimmer dominated the U-12 category with Mustafa Maqbool winning two gold medals (200m breaststroke and freestyle) while Rafi also bagged a gold in 50 meter free style.

In the concurrently held 24th National Age Group Championship for girls, Zoya Omair Hafiz from Sindh set a new national record in the U-12 200m Individual Medley, clocking 2:51.78.

The championship also saw strong team performances in the relays, with teams from Sindh and Punjab trading victories across the various age groups.—Sports Reporter

Neres double helps Napoli down Atalanta

ROME: Champions Napoli thumped Atalanta 3-1 to provisionally climb back top of Serie A on Saturday inspired by a brace from their Brazilian winger David Neres.

While Napoli now boast 25 points, Inter Milan, Bologna and AS Roma are all on 24, with Inter playing AC Milan and Roma taking on Cremonese.

After losing last time out to Bologna, Napoli bounced back by racing three ahead in the first half with Neres scoring on 17 and 38 minutes before Nao Lang's headed effort sent the champions 3-0 at half-time.

Atalanta pulled a goal back seven minutes after the break through Gianluca Scamacca but failed to push on as the Bergamo club sit 13th with 13 points from 12 games.

Earlier on Saturday, Bologna romped to a 3-0 away win at Udinese to climb level with Inter and Roma.

In-form Bologna missed a penalty in the first half before Tommaso Pobega scored twice in five minutes around the hour mark to leave Udinese reeling.

Federico Bernardeschi added a third in stoppage time.

Elsewhere, Cagliari drew 3-3 with Genoa in a see-saw game in Sardinia in the other early match.

Meanwhile, Luciano Spalletti took his Juventus side to rock-bottom Fiorentina and they took the lead late in the first half with a long-range strike from Filip Kostic.

Fiorentina struck back shortly after the break when Rolando Mandragora picked out the top corner from distance to earn his winless team a 1-1 draw.

This was a second successive stalemate for Juventus which threatens to derail the Turin side's ambitions to challenge at the top of Serie A.

Spalletti's Juventus stay sixth on 20 points, with four of the five clubs ahead of them.

"As an ambition you have to have the fight for the Scudetto," Spalletti told reporters. "I think I can make the players give more than what we showed today."—AFP

Spain to face holders Italy in Davis Cup final

BOLOGNA: Marcel Granollers and Pedro Martinez helped Spain set up a Davis Cup final with two-time defending champions Italy after eliminating Alexander Zverev's Germany 2-1 on Saturday.

As in the quarter-final victory against the Czech Republic, qualification came down to the decisive doubles match, in which Granollers and Martinez defeated German pair Kevin Krawietz and Tim Puetz 6-2, 3-6, 6-3.

"I'm really proud of my players, they had to fight to get this far," said Spain captain David Ferrer.

It is a first final for six-time champions Spain since 2019 and they are playing without injured world number one Carlos Alcaraz.

Italy are also playing without world number two Jannik Sinner and eighth-ranked Lorenzo Musetti.

"The most important is that we're in the Final. Of course, we're playing in Bologna. It's Italy's home," said Ferrer.

"We're going to be ready to fight and to have a chance to win."

Having rallied after being thoroughly outplayed in the first set, the Germans faltered at the start of the third, losing their serve to love to fall behind 3-1.

Their only break point at 5-3 was saved by an ace from Granollers, and the match ended two points later with a smash from Martinez.

Pablo Carreno Busta had handed Spain the advantage in the first match of the tie, beating Jan-Lennard Struff 6-4, 7-6(8/6).

However, the straight-sets win was not without drama as the Spaniard recovered from 6-1 down in the tie-break to win seven consecutive points and give Spain the edge.

The German had earlier saved three match points to hold on for 5-5 in the second set.

He then started the tie-break impeccably, building what appeared to be an unassailable advantage. But his nerve suddenly deserted him and Carreno Busta pulled off an incredible comeback.

World number three Zverev, the highest-ranked player among the eight teams that qualified in the absence of Spain's Carlos Alcaraz and Italy's Jannik Sinner, then levelled by defeating 36th-ranked Jaume Munar 7-6(7/2), 7-6(7/5).

SPAIN'S Jaume Munar in action during his Davis Cup semi-final against Germany's Alexander Zverev.—Reuters

After seeing his early break wiped out, Zverev made his move in the tie-break to storm to a one-set lead.

Munar hit back by pouncing on the German's serve in the third game of the second frame.

However, Zverev kept his calm to force a second tie-break from which he emerged victorious to bring out the doubles pairings.—AFP

Imam, Awais and Rohail shine as final Quaid Trophy round begins

LAHORE: The last round of the Quaid-e-Azam Trophy began on Sunday with three centuries and two impressive five-wicket hauls across Abbottabad, Islamabad, Peshawar and Rawalpindi.

At Abbottabad, Multan's Imam-ul-Haq struck a commanding 181 off 232 balls — his 16th first-class century — to steer his side to 360-5 in 84 overs against Abbottabad.

After small stands with Waqar Hussain and Imran Butt, Imam added 193 for the third wicket with Sharoon Siraj, who made 83. Zeeshan Ashraf was unbeaten on 30 at stumps. Mansoor Ali picked up three wickets and Adil Naz claimed two.

At Islamabad's Marghzar Ground, Faisalabad recovered from a disastrous 23-4 to post 305-9, thanks to Mohammad Awais Zafar's superb 148 — his seventh first-class century and second of the season. He hit 15 fours and seven sixes.

Opener Hasan Raza (53) and Raees Ahmed (53) offered key support, adding partnerships of 150 and 102 with Awais respectively. For Bahawalpur, Mohammad Imran returned 3-57.

In Peshawar, Fata's Hayatullah produced the best bowling performance of the day with career-best figures of 7-78 to bowl out Lahore Whites for 205. Qasim Akram top-scored with 54 after an 83-run stand with Hussain Talat (30), but Lahore collapsed from 153-4 to 205 all out. Fata closed on 86-3, trailing by 119.

At the Diamond Cricket Ground in Islamabad, Rohail Nazir's unbeaten 113 guided Islamabad to 346-5 against Peshawar. Rohail added 120 with Shamyl Hussain, whose brisk 76 featured seven fours and five sixes, and later put on 149 with Naseerullah (73). Peshawar's Mohammad Irfan took two wickets.

At Rawalpindi's Shoaib Akhtar Stadium, Karachi Blues ended the day 144-3, 32 runs behind Sialkot in the clash between table-toppers. Shan Masood anchored the innings with an unbeaten 60 after sharing a 62-run stand with Saad Baig (29).

Earlier, Karachi pacer Mphammad Umar claimed 5-40 — his second five-wicket haul — and Kashif Bhatti took 4-67 to reduce Sialkot to 92-7. But Mehran Mumtaz lifted them to 176 all out with a counterattacking 70 off 61 balls, hitting eight fours and four sixes.—Agencies

Fawad stars with fifty as Pakistan beat Hong Kong in Over-40s T20

KARACHI: Pakistan notched their second straight win of the Over-40s T20 World Cup, defeating Hong Kong by 57 runs at the National Bank Stadium on Sunday.

Batting first, Pakistan piled up 192-4 with vice-captain Fawad Alam smashing 56 off 28 balls and Tariq Mahmood adding 46. Hong Kong replied with 135-6. Mohammad Suleman took 3-35 while Zulfiqar Babar claimed 2-16. Fawad was named Player of the Match.

At Southend Club, UAE beat West Indies by five wickets thanks to Malik Qamar Abbas's unbeaten 100 off 57 balls — the tournament's first century. West Indies had made 139-5.

Rest of Gulf downed Zimbabwe by four wickets at Karachi Gymkhana, chasing 107 with three overs to spare.

In another fixture at the National Bank Stadium, USA chased Sri Lanka's 173-8 to win by five wickets, with Suneth Sampath and Anwar Ahmad scoring half centuries.

South Africa produced the day's most convincing result, thrashing Canada by 10 wickets at Karachi Gymkhana after dismissing them for 64. Nathaniel Howard bagged five wickets.

Australia wrapped up a 43-run win over Rest of the World at Southend Club, defending 151-7 to bowl out their opponents for 108.—Agencies

India win first blind women's T20 World Cup

COLOMBO: India beat Nepal by seven wickets in Colombo on Sunday to win the first Blind Women's T20 World Cup.

India won the toss and elected to field and restricted Nepal to 114-5.

They replied with 117-3 in just 12 overs to become the unbeaten champions in an inaugural tournament that also included Australia, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and the United States.

India's Phula Saren top scored with 44 off 27 deliveries. Nepal's top scorer was Sarita Ghimire with 35 off 38 balls.

Sri Lanka and India co-hosted the tournament with the final at Sri Lanka's oldest Test venue, the P. Saravanamuttu Stadium.

Blind cricket is played with a white plastic ball packed with ball bearings that rattle as it rolls — which allows it to be heard by players.

The bowler must ask the striker if he or she is ready and then yell "play" as the ball is delivered underarm with at least one bounce.

Each side has 11 players, like regular cricket, but at least four must be totally blind. Players are required to wear blindfolds for fairness.

Fielders clap once to reveal their positions.

Others players can be partially sighted, classified by how far they can see — two metres for B2 players, six for B3. Each team can have up to eight B1, or totally blind, players. Any run scored by a B1 player is counted as two.—AFP

Verstappen wins big in Vegas with McLarens disqualified

LAS VEGAS: Formula One world champion Max Verstappen produced a masterful drive to win the Las Vegas Grand Prix on Saturday and his title hopes were boosted further with the McLarens of championship leader Lando Norris and Oscar Piastri both being disqualified.

Norris finished the race in second with Piastri fourth but the skid blocks on both cars were found after the race to be less than the minimum depth.

The disqualifications mean that with two race weekends remaining, four-time defending champion Verstappen is now level on points with Piastri in the title race, just 24 points behind Norris.

But Verstappen's chances of a fifth successive title will depend on another spectacular slip-up from Norris or his McLaren team.

With a maximum of 58 points available in the final two grands prix, the Briton just needs to score two more points than each of his rivals in next weekend's penultimate weekend in Qatar, which includes a sprint, to secure his first title.

LAS VEGAS: Red Bull Racing's Max Verstappen leads Mercedes' George Russell during the Formula One Las Vegas Grand Prix at Las Vegas Strip Circuit.—Reuters

Verstappen dominated in Vegas from the moment he pounced on a slip by pole-sitter Norris on the first turn of Sin City's street circuit to grab the lead.

Thereafter he controlled the race to claim the 69th Grand Prix win of his career, finishing more than 20 seconds clear.

The Dutchman said Red Bull's tyre strategy had laid the foundation for the win.

"Normally the race is always a tough one for us. We are not normally that great on tyres but today it seemed like we were more in control and I could push a little bit more," he said.

"We had a lot more pace and I could stay out a little bit longer and split the race in half and that definitely helped a lot.

"The car was working pretty well, much more to my liking and at the end it was quite a decent lap. Every lap I was just feeling comfortable and not taking too much out of the tyre."

Mercedes' George Russell finished third on the track but was upgraded to second with his teammate Kimi Antonelli, who finished in fifth, moving up to third.

After the drama of Friday's qualifying, when heavy rain made for a treacherous surface that Verstappen likened to driving on ice, Saturday's 50-lap race under the glittering lights of Las Vegas got under way in cool, dry conditions.

Norris, who had arrived in Vegas fresh from back-to-back wins in Mexico and Sao Paulo, attempted an aggressive move to block Verstappen right from the start.

The move backfired and Norris ran off the track and allowed Verstappen to grab first place. Norris dropped back to third after he was passed by Russell into second.

"I made the mistake into turn one," Norris said.

"You know you've got to be punchy into turn one, but I was just a bit too punchy and that cost me."

Piastri, who began in fifth place on the grid, was also ruing a challenging start which saw him bump wheels with RB's Liam Lawson.

The Australian had been desperately looking to make up ground in Vegas after surrendering a 34-point advantage in the drivers championship since his victory at the Dutch Grand Prix in August.

But the 24-year-old from Melbourne acknowledged that his hopes of catching Norris had taken a blow after Saturday's race.

"It would be nice to get some good results to finish the year but the championship picture is what it is," he said.—AFP